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HUMAN RIGHTS

UNITED NATIONS

## THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

High on the agenda of the upcoming World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 14-25 June) is the item on indigenous people. The human rights of indigenous people, especially their right to development as they choose, are increasingly the focus of international concern. The World Bank, whose policies and programmes directly affect many indigenous populations, has moved to make concerns regarding these populations central to its policy formulation and execution.

The World Conference is being held in the middle of 1993, which is the International Year of the World's Indigenous People. These peoples represent a cultural diversity, a link with the past, and an attachment to the earth which are threatened by an increasingly homogeneous and urban global society. Yet development planners have tended not to take indigenous people adequately into account. Recently, however, indigenous people have made their voices better heard



and development planners have responded more to their needs and to their contribution to society.

More than 300 million indigenous and tribal people live in over 70 countries in almost every climate zone from the remote Arctic regions and the deserts of northern and southern Africa to the Pacific Islands and the rainforests of Asia and South America. There is a great diversity in language, culture, dress and habits among indigenous people. But they share common traits, such as a strong identity with their ancestral homelands.

In its 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, the World Commission on Environment and Development said indigenous communities "are the repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experience that links humanity with its ancient origins. Their disappearance [would be] a loss for the larger society, which could learn a great deal from their traditional skills in sustainably managing very complex ecological systems. It is a terrible irony that as formal development reaches more deeply into rainforests, deserts, and other isolated environments, it tends to destroy the only cultures that have proved able to thrive in these environments."

For most indigenous people, land is not viewed as a commodity which can be bought or sold in impersonal markets, but rather as a substance endowed with sacred meanings which define their existence and identity. Similarly, the trees, plants, animals and fish which inhabit the land are not "natural resources", but highly personal beings which form part of their social and spiritual universe. This close attachment to the land and a strong sense of ethnic identity are the defining characteristics of indigenous people.

On 10 December 1992, the United Nations General Assembly launched 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous People. The impetus for designating a special year for indigenous people came from indigenous organizations, UN human rights and social development agencies and several Governments. The purpose was to highlight the importance of indigenous people to peace and security, human rights, economic development and the environment.

The theme of the international year is "Indigenous Peoples–A New Partnership." Among other things, the year's activities attempt to further international cooperation between states and intergovernmental bodies to solve problems faced by indigenous people, increase their participation in development projects that affect them, and raise public awareness about indigenous people. Activities during the international year focus on human rights, development and the environment, education and culture, health and self-government. The World Bank participated in the UN technical meeting to plan the international year and has its own activities to celebrate the year.

### World Bank policy

The World Bank was the first multilateral agency to issue a special policy for the treatment of indigenous people in internationally funded development projects. The original policy dates back to when the Bank became involved in several projects that affected the lands of indigenous tribes in the Brazilian Amazon. Safeguards embedded in the World Bank policy included recognizing, demarcating and protecting indigenous lands, and providing culturally appropriate social services, especially to protect and maintain indigenous people's health.

The policy says clearly: "The Bank will not assist development projects

that knowingly involve encroachment on traditional territories being used or occupied by tribal people, unless adequate safeguards are provided."

Based on experience from the previous decade, the World Bank issued a revised policy in September 1991. The policy extended the definition of indigenous people to reflect the much broader range of social and legal definitions and situations in Bank member countries. The protective measures of the original policy were retained. But the revised version strengthened the policy by stressing the need to promote the informed participation of indigenous people and their sharing in the social and economic benefits of development projects. One way of ensuring this is through the preparation and financing of special Indigenous Development Plans.

### Assistance projects

There are several projects in the Bank's lending programme that contain such plans or encourage participation by indigenous people. They include a rubber plantation project in India with a component that will help 3,000 tribal people improve their economic status by planting rubber in currently unproductive land. A rural development project in four of Mexico's poorest states contains a programme of 44 credit funds managed by indigenous people. The funds support initiatives such as training in preparing small-scale projects, accounting procedures, coffee-growing, artisan projects, establishing fishing cooperatives, and other cottage industries. The credit programme covers hundreds of indigenous communities.

Other projects include natural resources management programmes in Colombia, Egypt and Mali, and a rainforest conservation project in Brazil that will set apart land for tribal people. The Bank also has been carrying out other innovative work, such as a study of poverty among tribal people in Latin America and an assessment of the health and nutritional problems of tribes in India. Within the Bank, a number of training courses and special events have been held to increase the staff's sensitivity to the institution's policies and projects relating to indigenous people.

In January 1993, the President of the World Bank created a Vice Presidency on Environmentally Sustainable Development, and the Environment Department established a special Social Policy and Resettlement Division, to enable the institution to consolidate and improve its work on behalf of indigenous people and other social groups.

The International Year of the World's Indigenous People aims at creating a partnership among international agencies (such as the World Bank), governments and indigenous organizations to improve the conditions of some of the world's most vulnerable people. The Bank joined this partnership to further promote the welfare of indigenous people–and also to learn from these traditional keepers of the wisdom of sustainable development.

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